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RAIL TRAVEL newsletter

VOL. 3 NO. 17
FIRST ISSUE OF
SEPTEMBER 1973
#67

Mexico

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MEXICO

Kenneth A. Maylath
and
Peter Putnam Bretz

A REPORT ON SUMMER RAIL TRAVEL IN MEXICO BY OUR INTREPID TRAIN RIDERS, PRECEDED BY PETER'S ACCOUNT OF GETTING TO THE BORDER ON AMTRAK

It was with a sense of high adventure and anticipation that I stood on the platform at Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal that pleasant Friday evening, July 6, watching the consist of Number Two, the eastbound SUNSET LIMITED, slowly back into the station. I was ready to embark on a 2-week rail cruise that was to take me to New Orleans, thence back to San Antonio and then down into Mexico for extensive wanderings. This first leg was to be taken in first class accommodations all the way to New Orleans. It had been difficult obtaining reservations, with Amtrak giving me some story about not releasing space in the New Orleans sleeper until 3 weeks or so before departure. But my roomette was finally confirmed, and an extra bonus added at my request. This was a stay in the terminating pullman car overnight at New Orleans. A note in the "All America Train Fares" stated that for a fee of $8.40, I could stay up to 18 hours after arrival in the sleeper. This meant saving money over hotel prices. This was not overnight in the through car leaving on the SOUTHERN CRESCENT the next morning, but on the pullman car staying in New Orleans. So I was looking forward to 3 nights in my sleeper.

Now, as the train backed past me on the platform, I took down the actual consist. From the rear forward: 5 hi-level ex-Santa Fe coaches; UP lounge 6201 (former "Platte River," ACF 1949) still in UP yellow; an SP diner; Santa Fe dorm-lounge 1341; sleepers "Indian Flute" (11-bdrm, ex-Santa Fe), "Oriole" (ex-SCL 16 duplex roomette, 4 bdrm, ex-B&O, Budd 1954), and "Clarendon County" (10-6, Pullman-Standard 1949); and baggage car. "Clarendon County" was in SCL Hamburg colors, the other 2 sleepers were refurbished Amtrak. As it happened, my space was in "Oriole," which suited me fine. I had an upstairs duplex roomette on the left side. This car was laid out with the 4 bedrooms in the center for a better ride.

The train now stood at the platform, the crew swarming on, making the train ready for passenger boarding. Altho it was now 8:30pm with a half hour before sailing time, the dining car was only now being stocked with provisions. Why have it done on the platform rather than earlier in the yards? As the food was being put on board, I overheard a comment that this diner had developed some kind of air conditioning trouble coming west two days ago. The thought went thru my mind that maybe this was the same diner that Paul Rayton had had so much "fun" with on his SUNSET sojourn past (see RTN, 2nd June issue). But all looked fine this night.

At loading time I had no trouble boarding; the porter was courteous and polite. We left right at 9pm. The lounge car opened a little later for late evening drinks and sandwiches. The refurbishing in "Oriole" was tasteful (purple toilet seat cover and all). I wafted to sleep around Indio secure in the knowledge that this trip anyway everything was under complete control, and Paul Rayton must be mistaken. As the dark miles streaked by we got closer to the desert and to the realization that it was I who was mistaken.

Passing thru the vestibules the next morning near Tucson on the way to the diner I noticed that even at 7:30am it was roasting hot outside. And, upon arrival for breakfast, it was roasting hot in the dining car too, and was not cooling down. Naturally the problem was that the air conditioning unit had broken. Not only that, but all the electricity was out. Mr. Goldburg, the steward, said that the crew had worked by candlelight that morning getting things ready. What's for breakfast? Only cold cereal, donuts, fruit juice, etc. No ham and eggs, no toast, no hash browns or pancakes. Somehow, coffee was available, but it tasted bitter. This diner was SP 10211, one of the "Audubon" diners built by Budd in 1950 for the streamlined SUNSET. During its last westbound run, the air conditioning had been out of service the entire way, with Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, Tucson unable or unwilling to fix it. The word had come down, west out of El Paso, for Amtrak to supply free meals the rest of the way into Los Angeles. Would this also happen this time? And, why wasn't the diner adequately repaired in Los Angeles? The likely reason was that there were no spare diners around and so it was pushed back into service again, hoping that light repairs could do it. They couldn't.

What is it actually like to have a diner with no air conditioning during the summer over SP's southern run? Having a coach or a sleeper's air go out can often be only a minor inconvenience (just move to another car--if available), but the dining car is more susceptible to problems. Breakfast was bearable, if only because the car hadn't heated up too badly as yet. Lunch and dinner were almost impossible. One would walk from the cool lounge into the heat of the diner and it wouldn't be too bad at first. Then, after ordering, you would begin to feel that no, your underarm deodorant wasn't working all that well, and a slight embarrassment began. Then, about the time the food arrived one could feel sweat all across one's back. A continual mopping of the face, of course. Then, around bill-paying time you realized that you would have to change some clothes after leaving.

If the patron in the dining section felt uncomfortable, the crew in the kitchen were in a blast furnace. My inspection of that part of the car registered about 120° inside. And this with the stove no operating. Yes, in an effort to keep things under control, the stoves were left off so as to keep the kitchen just barely fit for human habitation. As a result, no hot food available for eating. Other ways were tried to keep the heat down: opening the service door from the kitchen to the outside, keeping the shades down by the tables to block the sunlight, opening the vestibule doors between the diner and lounge, and fanning oneself with the "Scott towel" menus. All of this just didn't make that much difference. And at each major stop SP electricians would come out, poke around the car, pronounce that they were unable to repair it, and walk off. And at these stops the steward would go into the station, phone Amtrak to request that the passengers have free food. The answer was always no.

"Dinner in the diner,
nothing could be finer,
When the sweat drips off you
on the Sunset Liner."

Needless to say, there were quite a few unhappy passengers that trip. Myself, I'm somewhat persistent in the face of negative odds, having braved the diner for each meal. In spite of the heat, it was enjoyable having to select from cold cuts and salads. I had a large Amtrak salad that I wouldn't have ordered under normal circumstances and found it quite delicious. During the trip inquiries were made to the steward, various trainmen, an Amtrak official riding the train, and an SP official also on board. Asked why the diner wasn't being fixed, each person seemed to have his own variation of "Well, I really don't know and it's not my department." And in answer to a question about how often cars break down like this, is the railroad and/or Amtrak doing the proper job, etc., to a man each person said "Oh, everything is just so fine and wonderful at my end, but I'm not so sure about the other people and their departments." Kind of a self-protection answer.

Aside from the diner, the A-C held cool and steady in the other cars. I was quite satisfied with "Oriole" except that there never was any hot water. In fact, during the entire trip, Mexico and all, the only hot water I ever encountered was in hotel rooms--and not all of them either. The lounge, which had been refurbished by UP in the mid-60's, was worn and threadbare in spots. Amtrak had made some "repairs" with mismatched fabric. The whole effect was a patchy elegance. As built for CITY trains, this car had space for a barber's chair and valet service. This was ripped out now, and the extra space was made into an open "card room" with a nice painting of birds on one wall. Mothers and kids found the room ideal. The Santa Fe lounge on the other side

of the diner had no attendant service and was on the train for its dormitory section. The lounge was used by the cook and waiters to cool off every so often, and its convenient desk served conductors en route. The railroad officials also made the car home when they weren't sitting in a vacant roomette or bedroom.

We maintained time up to El Paso, leaving 15min late, and slowly lost more and more time. Pulling into Alpine, Texas 40min behind, the train ground to a halt with a bone-shaking crash. Seems one of the 4 covered wagons was acting up. Forty pieces of baggage loaded at the station, finally leaving Alpine one hour late. The jolt had cut off all the lights in the UP lounge, halting bar service. But an electrician was able to get it fixed up, altho the diner remained dark and hot.

Next day it was just as hot in the dining car, and there was a smaller selection of food. At Houston, the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus train was parked at the station. Among the many pullman cars I noticed two sister cars to "Oriole"--"Kingfisher" and "Mockingbird," altho the names didn't appear on the side. A circus trainman told me that name plates had been machined for each car's vestibule door at the beginning of the season, but already "railfans" had stolen them off the car, ripping holes in the door in the process.

We left Houston 2hrs late. Much of the time was lost because of slowing thru many small Texas towns. The explanation was that due to the recent rash of derailments, these towns have passed ordinances to restrict train speeds to 40 or 50mph thru town. As a result there is much slowing down and speeding up. And the train gets later and later. East of Beaumont we sat for 18min waiting for a freight to pass. Thru Lake Charles 2hr 40min late. My ETA at New Orleans kept getting later. Much slowing, plus getting stopped at a bayou for a boat. We finally arrived at New Orleans 2hr 40min late, even with the padding in the schedule. The moon was out, however, giving us a beautiful

Photo on page 7:
EL REGIOMONTANO, with its short all-sleeper consist, rests in the station at Mexico City. Photo by Ken Maylath.

---

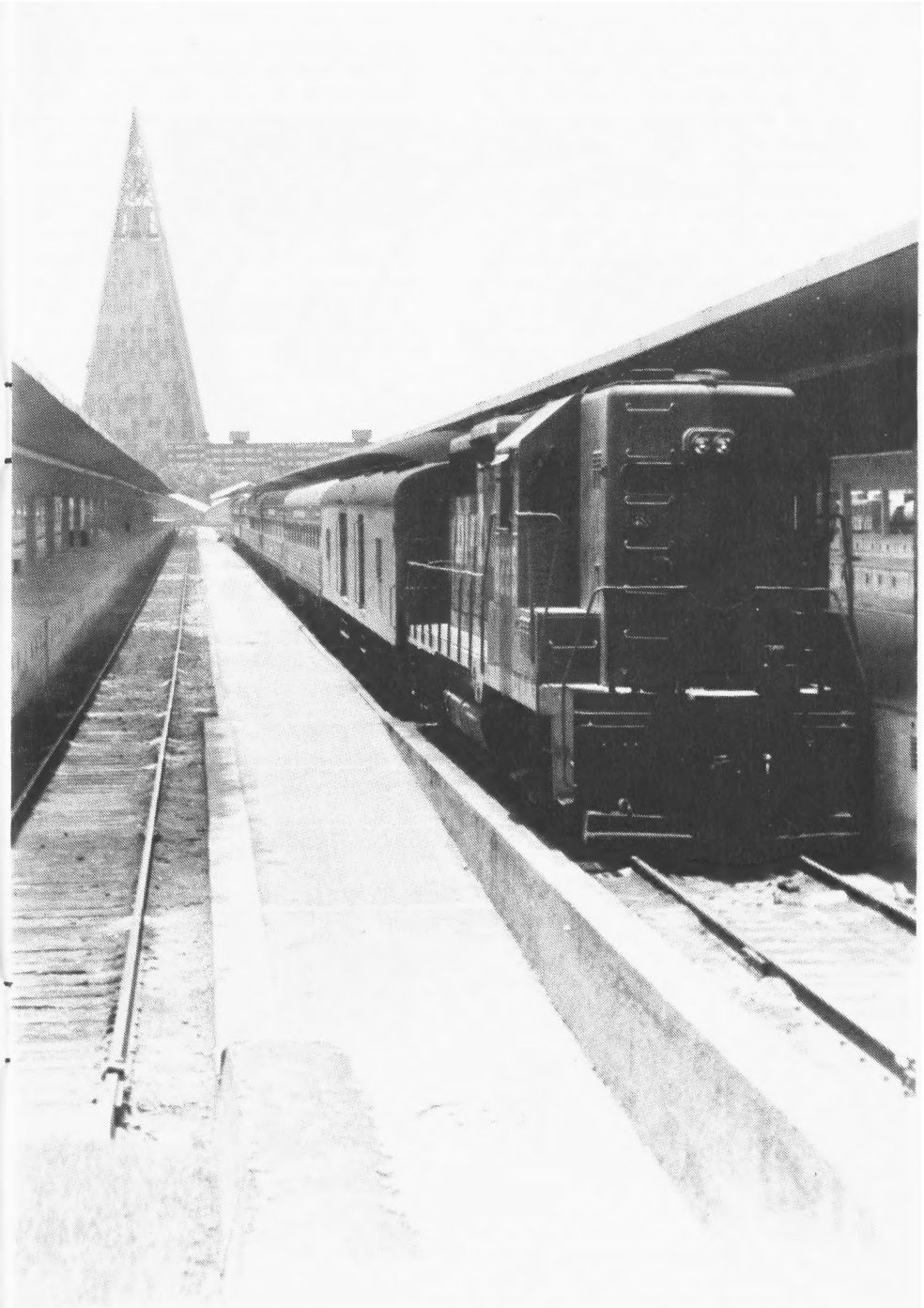
view of the Huey P. Long Memorial Bridge.

It really didn't matter how late we were, as I would be staying over in "Oriole" anyway. But such was not to be. Altho my ticket stated it, no one on the train had ever heard of the provision, nor could anyone at New Orleans help me. They all referred to the through car, saying that "Oriole" would be taken to the yards for servicing. After much haggling, with my showing people the statement in the fare book, I finally gave up. I've since learned that for terminating passengers this overnight provision has now been cancelled. I did get a refund later with no trouble. All worked out well in the end, as the westbound SOUTHERN CRESCENT was also late, arriving a few minutes before. I met Ken Maylath on the platform, and as planned we travelled together the rest of the trip.

After sampling the streetcar line in New Orleans next morning, we both boarded the westbound SUNSET. It sported Amtrak covered wagon #113, the first ex-SP F unit to be repainted, and had almost the same consist as before. We were delayed 18min on departure because of running out of fuel for the diesel-operated air conditioning units on the hi-level coaches. After a while a drum was hauled out and hand fueling took place with the use of a fork lift truck.

I found that the segment between the Long Bridge and New Iberia was one of the more exasperating runs over any subdivision I've had in a long time. We managed to lose 45min over the 18min-late departure from New Orleans on a variety of slow orders and a meet that took ten minutes. We always seemed to be slowing down for something. Servicing at Houston should have been accomplished in something less than the 35min it took. The schedule, of course, is not that ambitious to begin with.

The equipment, for a really long distance train, was nothing to get excited about when you go beyond the hi-level coaches. The only SP car was the



diner (the same #10211 as before and still not working!!), very little refurbished equipment (only "Oriole" and "Indian Flute"), and just not generally of the level you would expect on a cross-country run, compared with the SUPER, BUILDER, or SF ZEPHYR. Obviously not a very high priority, in spite of good patronage. There was an air conditioning failure in the refurbished N.Y.-L.A. sleeper ("West Palm Beach," a 10-6), as well as in the diner. The lounges were not too bad but non-refurbished and a bit shopworn. The track east of Houston as noted by Paul Rayton, is not up to SP mainline standards in many places.

The importance of family fares was indicated by the woman and 3 children en route from Pensacola, FL to L.A. They had to take a Greyhound to New Orleans and weren't especially complimentary about the trip. It would have cost about twice as much if they had flown, compared to family fare, and that was a major reason why they were on the train.

A middle-aged woman from Houston had wanted to take the train to New Orleans but flew when she found it was hours late. Nevertheless, she was returning from New Orleans on the SUNSET. The passenger load steadily increased as we moved west, with a really big crowd boarding at Houston. We left the home of the Astros 1hr 40min late. The lights in the hi-level coaches stayed on a very long time, almost an hour after departure. The coach attendant told me he had to wait until the conductor came thru to collect the tickets. Well, the other trainman happened to have done that about 45minutes before. Since he didn't believe me, the porter made a check, then finally gave the passengers' eyes a break by turning the lights off.

There were Amtrak and SP people riding the train, in an apparent effort to deal with some of the persistent problems. One could almost get the impression that the SP is really interested in improving things (especially since Amtrak is showing signs of increased concern and toughness in dealing with the railroads). However, they have had a negative mentality in the operation of passenger trains so long now it's almost easy to believe that they find it difficult to translate desire into reality. A comparison with the SUPER CHIEF is quite revealing in the way the Santa Fe, which has always tried to operate good trains, is able to routinely accomplish things the SP doesn't seem able to manage. Of course, the lower priority in equipment and the still tri-weekly operation, even in the summer, show that Amtrak finds other trains more important.

The Amtrak official placed a phone call to Washington DC about the non-functioning SP 10211 diner, holding up the train five extra minutes at Lafayette, LA. Later, word came down the line that all passengers would get free meals the next day and all the way to Los Angeles. Unfortunately, we didn't get to enjoy that, since we detrained at San Antonio at 3:53am or 1hr 38min late.

We were bused the next day from the SP station to the International and Great Northern (Mopac) boarded-up station. Most passengers waited for the train in the air-conditioned MCI-5 bus provided by San Antonio Transit. And 16 minutes late, the INTER-AMERICAN pulled in, sporting an ex-UP E unit #428. It was pulling two ex-Santa Fe 44-seat coaches, with a diner-lounge spliced between them.

This is not a bad little train--altho with its lack of connections and scheduling it doesn't enjoy the comparative success of most Amtrak trains this summer. Leaving a few minutes late from the Alamo City, it arrived in Laredo a few minutes early. Things could be improved with more cooperation from the MP. Reliable information gave this picture of what happened when the railroad became aware of Amtrak's interest in using the line from San Antonio to the border: Speed limit signs on several curves--and there aren't many on that stretch--were taken down. Thus for most of the

Photos on page 8: (top) Passengers absorbed in the scenery in the ex-MoPac dome car on the Chihuahua Pacific's VISTA TRAIN; (bottom) What they're viewing: the front of the VISTA TRAIN winding toward a tunnel thru a luxuriant, rain cloud-swept canyon. The authors thought of this train as the RIO GRANDE ZEPHYR of Mexico. Photos by Peter Putnam Bretz.

distance the train is limited to an unrealistic 55mph--the speed limit for the curves. Actually the track is generally in excellent condition, with much welded rail. A limit of at least 70, except on the curves, seems entirely practical. Even so, the trip was completed in 3½ hours, including a 10-min loss for a freight meet at Pearsoll (where we took siding), while the timetable allows almost 4 hours for the run. Likewise, the MoPac is apparently imposing the artificially low limits on the NATIONAL LTD between Kansas City and St. Louis.

As for the trip itself, the air conditioning gave out in one of the two coaches and was marginal for a hot day in the diner. The diner is worthy of comment: Refurbished Amtrak #8340, it was purported to be ex-NYC, and it was refurbished at Beech Grove, by the look of it--very attractive with lounge seating, several tables, and a lunch counter. My records show no such car owned by the NYC (only grill-diners), but it may have been ex-MoPac (altho MP diner-lounges had no counters). It was manned by two women. A nice selection of food with distinctively-shaped cardboard-thickness menus--but no heavy meals. It was a nice plus for the train, but I couldn't help thinking how appropriate it would be for this car to operate on a N.Y.-Buffalo Empire Service run--back in its home territory. This would avoid the necessity of an 8-hr trip with nothing but a small snack bar and no lounge seating at all. There was an Amtrak rep on the train. He and the agent were helpful at Laredo in expediting the taxi transfer to Old Mexico. No complaint about any of the crew members.

The passenger load was about 75, with about half of them boarding at San Antonio. About half the riders made the transfer to Mexico and the NdeM. Both of us boarded the AZTEC EAGLE and headed south.

* * *

Our Mexican adventure took place fortunately before the abnormally rough rainy season in August, with its massive floods and a hurricane; and before the late August earthquake added to the disruption and death toll.

Still, the summertime downpours did affect our travels. If you think Amtrak has problems running its trains according to schedule, try Mexico in the rainy season. Another problem tied to timekeeping is a shortage of motive power. Small wonder that the NdeM has recently placed a large diesel order. U.S. roads, as a rule, wouldn't dream of asking a single engine to handle the amount of tonnage routinely assigned south of the Rio Grande. Also an obvious problem is traffic density on certain lines, particularly around Mexico City.

If one travels apart from tour groups, as we did, reserving space can be a hassle. It takes time and patience for travel agents to arrange for advance rail reservations in Mexico and most would probably just as soon not get involved with it. The easiest part is arranging something from the border to the interior.

The border crossing via Amtrak's taxi arrangement from the INTER-AMERICAN is usually quite simple, especially if one's required Mexican Tourist Card is obtained in advance.

The NdeM station at Nuevo Laredo is a relatively new structure, bustling with activity in the hour before the early evening departure of the AZTEC EAGLE. In normal Mexican tradition, separate windows for 1st and 2nd class tickets. Altho without reservations, we bypassed the windows and followed the suggestion that we locate Senor Diaz, an NdeM representative who speaks English and specializes in helping Americans. He supplied reserved seats on the Primera Especial coach--Especial because unlike most regular first class coaches, it boasted air conditioning. Indeed, it was recognized instantly as a refugee from the C&O, probably since the advent of Amtrak. The NRPC has some of them--part of a large order in the late 40's--on its roster. Up front, 5 head end cars, 4 segunda (2nd class) heavyweight coaches and regular 1st class coach. Behind, diner, 3 pullmans and observation lounge. The diner and observation were some of the relatively few pieces of equipment in Mexico which never ran north of the border. They were built by Shindler of Switzerland. One of the sleepers, a 12-1 section car, was a real gem for vintage equipment fans. With its twirling fans and ornate lighting fixtures, you could imagine yourself riding the rails back home in the depths of the depression. The air conditioning in the observation car wasn't operational. In the ex-C&O coach it was 100%. The 16 cars were entrusted to a pair of GP units--which had their hands full.

Our departure from Nuevo Laredo, almost 15min late, was an omen of things to come. There were no obvious delays, but we slipped farther behind schedule at almost every stop. Our arrival at Monterrey came not at 10:35pm but at 12:20.

The NdeM uses a standardized dining car menu (which is printed in the Spanish language system timetable). Prices are modest enough by U.S. standards--$2.50 for the most expensive complete meals. Quality does vary, tho. One night your steak will be tender and delicious, next time more like the proverbial piece of shoeleather. A major difference from U.S. diners is the use of verbal rather than written orders. Service tends to be pretty good. Not so good is the occasional fly buzzing around your plate. At least one dining car crew kept swatters handy.

MEXICO

The AZTEC EAGLE's diner didn't get going until after 7pm--a half hour after departure. Business was brisk--with more than a few Americans--and the meals fairly good, complete with complementary wine. We discovered late in the evening that the diner doubled as a crew dormitory, with tables converted to berths, complete with curtains.

Our stop in Monterrey was largely for the purpose of sampling one of Mexico's newer and faster runs, EL REGIOMONTANO, overnight Monterrey to Mexico City. The name translated might seem more at home in Canada--The Mount Royal. It also has the distinction of being all-pullman.

Arriving a couple hours before train time, we were treated to an unexpected sight--arrival of the northbound run from Mexico City. Unexpected because it was due about 7 hours before it actually struggled in! We questioned some of the English-speaking passengers, and the best we could learn was that a long list of assorted delays caused the lateness.

In spite of the short turnaround, the equipment was cleaned and ready for boarding in plenty of time. Take away the NdeM color scheme and GP diesel unit, and one could have been riding the Water Level Route in the 50's. Only one car didn't originate with the New York Central, and that was an ex-Pennsy 10-6. It wasn't a long train--only 6 cars plus baggage. On the rear, quite properly, was an observation lounge. The cars were generally filthy on the outside, but nice inside. We made good use of the observation car as we climbed thru the mountains between Monterrey and Saltillo as darkness fell.

Even tho departure from Monterrey was 15min behind, the connecting Autovia, or railcar, hadn't shown yet. Asked about that, the conductor informed us (as best we could determine thru the language barrier) that we were a first class train and certainly didn't have to wait for any Autovia. By the time we reached Saltillo, our first stop, our lateness was almost an hour.

A good night's sleep and no rush to eat breakfast in the morning. After all, we weren't about to arrive in Mexico City at 7:50am. Meets, track work and such took its toll on our schedule. It was midday when we plunged into the twin tunnels just north of Mexico's capital and past the sprawling yards at Valle de Mexico--stronghold of steam until recent years. We eased to a stop at Buena Vista Station as the clock struck one.

If our time hadn't been impressive, the Mexico City subway was. We rode most of it and found it quiet (helped by the rubber tires), smooth and refreshingly free of the grafitti and vandalism so common on New York and Philadelphia subways. It was heavily patronized too. Small wonder that expansion plans are underway. Trains were usually well filled a couple of stops from the end of the line even outside rush hour periods. And it certainly doesn't take much of Mexico City's traffic and pollution to make one appreciate the speed and comfort of travel under the streets.

Late afternoon brought us back to the modern Buena Vista Station to board the unnamed overnight train to Oaxaca. This was to be a quick round trip on a line that's rather interesting, but bypassed by most tourists. It's not an impressive

train by U.S. standards--without dining car or lounge service and boasting a single pullman on the rear. That one car was again an NYC transplant, a 10-6 formerly of the "River" series. Ahead of it, one primera especial coach (ex-Canadian Pacific of all things, probably from the 30's), on regular primera coach, 4 second class, 3 head end cars and 2 diesel units.

This time, our departure was virtually on time. Things were not to remain so upbeat for long, however. Before clearing the Mexico City suburbs we nosed into a siding for a meet. We waited and waited--for more than an hour. A few miles down the line, another meet. This was a quickie, comparatively, with only a 30min wait. The upshot of all this was an arrival in San Lorenzo, about 75 miles from Mexico City, 2hr 45min late.

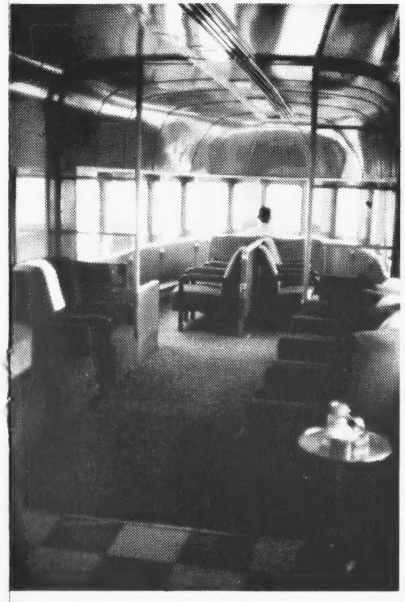
In the morning a check showed that we had dropped 5 hours behind. Our tardiness did have some compensation: we were traversing a most scenic area normally hidden in darkness on the run in both directions. The line thru that area and into Oaxaca was originally narrow gauge and looked it. A continuous succession of curves and grades. It wasn't surprising that the trucks of our pullman car protested with groaning and grinding sounds. Perhaps not surprising, but not much help in dropping off to sleep.

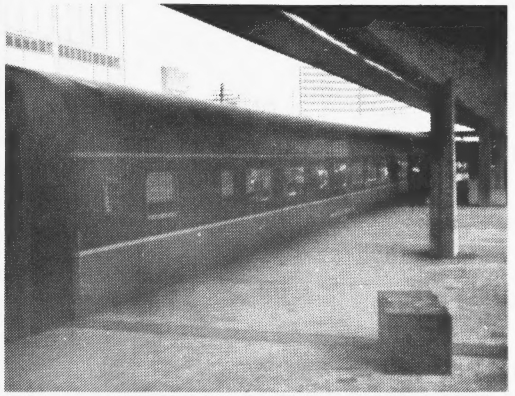
During a stop at Tomellin, shortly after 9am, a third diesel unit was added for what proved to be a long and scenic climb to higher elevations. While the servicing and switching took place, a wide variety of food was offered by vendors on the platform. We decided to cast our lot with the on-train snack vendor and his 24¢ ham sandwiches (made on board), soft drinks, beer and candy. As we climbed thru the rugged country we also made up time, arriving 4½ hours late at a place called Telixtlahuaca. Here we met train 107--Oaxaca to Puebla--already 2hrs late. It had to wait to complete a transfer of diesel units. Since we had arrived atop the grade, our third diesel unit went to train 107 for return to Tomellin. So--another 5hr late arrival (1:15pm) at the southernmost point of our journey--579km from Mexico City.

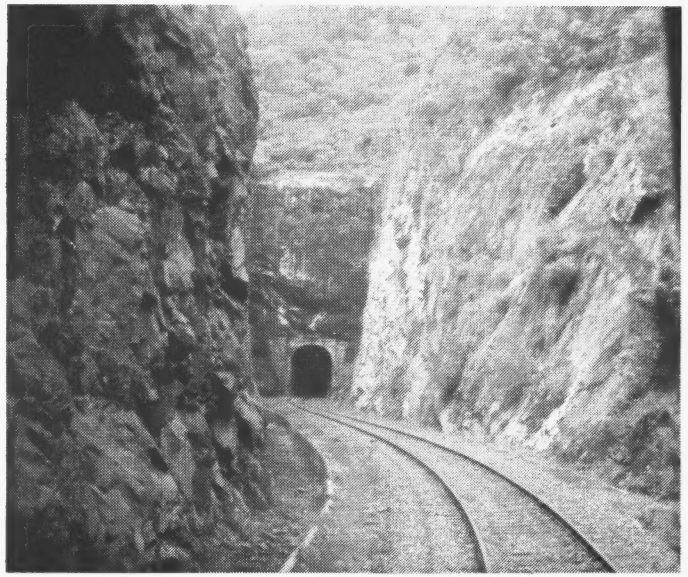
We weren't expecting any change in equipment for our return to Mexico City that night, and there wasn't any. There wasn't any change in the pattern of delays either. Seems that there was some hangup over other traffic on the line (which was hardly a CTC operation), meaning a holdup in our clearance to leave. The clearance finally came exactly one hour beyond our scheduled 7:30 departure.

Once we got rolling, things went smoothly, and we had gained back a few minutes by the time Tomellin was reached, at the base of the long grade. Come morning, a check showed that we had dropped another hour plus during the night, and we backed into the ancient station in Puebla more than two hours behind. The route taken between Puebla and San Lorenzo is not the same as that used for the faster Autovia tuns--but it's twisting and scenic. A meet with a mixed train at a place called Contadero found us more than 3hrs behind, with a few more minutes going by the board by the time San Lorenzo came into view. From this point it should have taken just over 2 hours to reach Mexico City, but that stretched to more than 3, primarily due to meets at 3 locations. No doubt about the benefit to be gained if a second track is added in that heavily traveled territory. We were 4hr 20min late this time at Buena Vista Station.

Just six hours in Mexico City before embarking on the next portion of our rambles south of the border. On to the west and north aboard the all-pullman train #5 --EL TAPATIO. No fewer than 14 pullmans, including 3 of the heavyweight variety. At least 8 of them originated with the NYC--including a couple from the late 30's which could well have been regulars on THE CENTURY. Indeed, we occupied a bedroom in what was originally the NYC "Herkimer County." It was a 13 (rather than usual 11) bedroom proposition, arranged a little differently than a typical postwar car. Other pullmans in the consist came from the IC, Texas & Paci-







Photos on page 13: (top left) Interior of ex-NYC tavern-observation car operating on EL REGIOMONTANO between Mexico City and Monterrey; (top right) The travelers' pullman car on the rear of the unnamed Mexico City-Oaxaca train, seen at Mexico City; photos by Ken Maylath. (bottom) View of a tunnel and rocky canyon walls from the rear observation car of Chihuahua Pacific's VISTA TRAIN. Photo by Peter Bretz.

fic, and C&EI. The full-length lounge had the looks of a prewar NYC stainless steel car. The diner, obviously a rather recent addition, was built for the EMPIRE BUILDER in 1951.

A heavy rain which developed in early evening fell as we boarded with a host of other passengers. The scene--scores of people pouring onto an all-pullman consist--certainly evoked thoughts of 20 or 30 years ago back home.

EL TAPATIO, one of Mexico's best trains, connecting two major cities, might be considered their equivalent of the BROADWAY or CENTURY. From a mileage point of view, it's about equal to a run between New York and Buffalo or Chicago and the Twin Cities. A good bit of hilly terrain, tho, produces a schedule of nearly 12 hours, even with a minimum of stops.

Wonder of wonders, we pulled out right on time at 8:30. But the 80km to Tula required 2 hours rather than the normal 90 minutes to accomplish. It appeared as tho we were in for another series of delays and another very tardy arrival. Not so this time. A check in the morning showed that most of the time had been recovered, and we were less than 10min late. A bit of delay from a freight meet, but our arrival in Guadalajara was still a fairly good 25min behind.

Guadalajara. One of Mexico's more modern large cities. The station is modern too, and would be a worthy addition in most U.S. cities. It serves the NdeM from the east and Pacific RR from the north. Most thru passengers for northern Mexico and the U.S. border stay right aboard as a couple of pullmans are switched from EL TAPATIO to the Pacific's recently upgraded train, EL COSTENO. That upgrading, incidentally, was accomplished with cars rejected by Amtrak after May, 1971. Our plans called for us to wait several hours for the departure of the secondary train up the coast, EL MEXICALI. EL COSTENO was sold out anyway. In any event, EL MEXICALI would put us into our next stopover point, Sufragio, at a more convenient time.

Aside from several head end cars, our train consisted of 6 second class coaches (2 recognizable as ex-Reading commuter cars), an ex-NYC first class special coach, first class coach off the MoPac, and 2 sleepers. A lightweight 14&4 car (ex-Texas & Pacific) was followed by a 10 sec-2 bdrm-1 cmpt heavyweight originating with the SP. It was apparently one of many cars inherited from north of the border when the SP had control of Pacific RR. Finally, the diner. It was an ex-ACL heavyweight, complete with broken air conditioning. Prices were slightly higher and food selection a bit wider than the typical NdeM facility.

We began moving exactly on time, at noon. Before getting out of Guadalajara we were to find out that vandalism can be found south as well as north of the Rio Grande. A rock slammed into the window of our section, shattering the outer part of the double window, but not the inner pane.

Altho the schedule of EL MEXICALI isn't a record breaker, it was nice to see how we kept with it, to the minute, for the first couple of hours. We rolled along at a good pace over the nicely maintained rails of the Pacific RR until getting knocked for a 20-min loss by a meet with the southbound COSTENO, which was late. The meet came at an out of the way siding as we dropped down from the higher elevation of Guadalajara to the coastal plain used by the line for most of its considerable distance. It's quite a spectacular sequence--twisting and turning thru countless tunnels and over numerous trestles. As we paused in the siding, we could watch a thunderstorm over the mountains behind. The sun was shining at our location, with rain and lightning just a few miles away.

In spite of the delay, padding in the timecard enabled us to reach Tepic--six hours from Guadalajara--right on time. By this time also that thunderstorm caught us. It was raining at Tepic and during the evening we passed thru some heavy downpours.

A disadvantage to section travel, aside from the problem of dressing and undressing, is the process of setting up and tearing down the beds at night.

Photos on page 14: (top) interior of the ex-TEXAS ZEPHYR diner-observation-lounge on the VISTA TRAIN; photo by Peter Bretz. (middle & bottom) Interior and exterior of the modern Buena Vista Station of National Railways of Mexico in Mexico City; photos by Ken Maylath.

This is especially so if the porter wants to do it at 8 or 9pm as was the case in our car. On the other hand, there seems to be a certain feeling that comes only upon retirement in a section. A certain purpose and reliability--of the railroad determining to get you there, as you slip under the brown Pullman Company blankets and gaze into the darkness thru the double windows separating you from the elements. You make a search for your watch, there in the hammock, stretched like a net between the windows. You turn out the lamp, arrange the pillows, listen to the click-a-de-clack of the six-wheel trucks speeding you thru the night. The lure of the heavyweight. A rare treat in 1973.

Morning found our train moving right along on the straight stretches of the coastal plain, about one hour behind schedule. We were able to regain a little of that during the last 2 hours, and we came to a stop at the new Sufragio station, shared by the Pacific and the Chihuahua Pacific Railroads, about 45min behind. It was a warm, sunny morning. No rush for us. You just don't plan on making a close connection to the Chihuahua Pacific there. A nearly 24-hour wait till the next morning is necessary. And you don't plan on spending the day in Sufragio, which is essentially a railroad junction in the middle of nowhere. Accommodations are available about 15 miles down the road toward the ocean, at Los Mochis. The latter is a surprisingly modern and pleasant little city, especially given its rather remote location. And after the overnight stay, a bus connection is available to the ChP station at the edge of town, where eastbound trains over the mountains to Chihuahua City start their runs.

Variety is the hallmark of ChP passenger service. Daily railcars (running in multiple sections as required) are supplemented by a twice-weekly pullman run, and now a tri-weekly VISTA TRAIN. It was this latter run, also the newest, that we took and can highly recommend. The name comes from the dome car (ex-Mo Pac, ex-IC) in the consist which constitutes an obvious plus as you travel thru spectacular scenery on one of North America's newest rail lines. And you travel thru all of it in daylight hours. Not only that, but complete meal service is

available in an ex-Ft. Worth & Denver diner-observation-lounge built for the TEXAS ZEPHYR in 1940. The train also carries a couple ex-Rock Island coaches of 1947 vintage. This train might be considered the RIO GRANDE ZEPHYR of Mexico. The VISTA TRAIN is another post-Amtrak innovation.

While our trip was enjoyable, two things would have made it even better. First, improved weather conditions. It was fine when we left Los Mochis at 7:30 am. A couple hours later, increasing cloudiness. By early afternoon, rain--which continued all the way to Chihuahua. At least we were able to photograph the western part of the line before the low-hanging clouds cut visibility to almost nothing. Thus, the regular 10-min stop at Copper Canyon, with its tremendous view, went for naught. Secondly, a better selection of food in the diner. By evening everything except a couple of sandwich varieties was gone. No dinner worthy of the name. The explanation was an extremely heavy load of passengers westbound the previous day. While our run was at 50% capacity at most, the day before saw a crowd of 300 eat most everything in the pantry. The dining car is stocked only in Chihuahua, except for things like soft drinks and beer.

We found the car more useful for viewing than dining, as it developed. It was pleasing inside and rode well. So we elected to spend much of our time not in the dome car but in the rearmost seats of the lounge sections, watching the track and scenery at low level on three sides.

On, up and thru the mountains we twisted, spectacular hour after hour, then rainy hour after hour. We didn't do badly, from a schedule viewpoint, tho we did lose some time meeting several rail cars and a freight. The last few hours, or course, came after dark, but we were covering the flat area between La Junta and Chihuahua by that time. Arrival at the relatively new ChP station in Chihuahua (separate from the NdeM facility) came at 11:15--about 70min late.

The final segment took us from Chihuahua to the border at El Paso. It provided a couple of firsts. Our first experience aboard an Autovia rail car and our first sample of true high speed running in Mexico. The trip is roughly equivalent to a trip between New York & Washington or Boston. Four hours is allowed, including no fewer than 14 scheduled stops.

The 2-car train left within a couple of minutes of schedule. It was filled to capacity--a little beyond if anything. Appointments and riding quality in the first class car were good and included a snack counter with a couple of tables at one end.

This is good territory for fast running. Mostly flat and open with a minimum of curves. Speed was usually a solid 70mph over well-maintained rails. In contrast to most previous runs in Mexico, delays and other problems were at a minimum. Stops, mostly in tiny trackside settlements, were brief--10 or 15 seconds in some cases. A refreshing change of pace to conclude our south-of-the-border epic. The last scheduled stop, 35min from Ciudad Juarez, found us still on time. An absolutely on-time arrival went by the boards when we made a slow approach thru the ramshackle suburbs of Juarez, so typical of Mexican cities. We eased to a stop just beyond the 5-min standard used by Amtrak to judge its arrivals. Well, perhaps it wouldn't have been appropriate to ruin our record of complete lateness. We weren't about to complain at a 7-min delay.

Rainy season or no, one just can't expect to find Swiss style precision in rail operations south of the Rio Grande. This is especially true on the NdeM. However, one does find a travel bargain. Pullman travel in Mexico is somewhat cheaper than riding coach in the U.S. Not only that, but the peso hasn't been devalued in relation to the dollar, making travel a bigger bargain than a year ago. A comparison of current NdeM dining car prices with a 1966 menu shows some inflation, but probably no as much as in the U.S.

We certainly wouldn't recommend the ultra-cheap second class coach for most American tourists. But if you stick to pullman and air conditioned first class special coaches, you'll generally find equipment close to U.S. standards--in fact almost all of it is from the U.S. Don't expect to find hot water in Mexican trains outside dining cars, tho.

Your dollar goes farther for meals and lodging in Mexico, too, so long as you avoid luxury type restaurants and hotels. You still must watch such things as the water and unpeeled fruits. On trains assume that tap water isn't safe. There's always plenty of soda, beer and bottled water available anyway.

Language can be a hassle at times. The average Mexican knows little English. Most dining cars, as well as hotels and restaurants doing a lot of tourist business print menus in two languages. We used the gimmick of preparing some form letters in advance, in Spanish, to cover ticket purchases we expected to make. There was no getting around the fact that correspondent Bretz's knowledge of elementary Spanish helped on many occasions.

Quality of Mexican rail travel, including the timekeeping, may be on the upswing. One person in a position to know told us that operations had been sliding a bit on the NdeM during the past few years. In the past year there has been a shakeup at the top of the government rail system. The new, younger blood, it is said, is intent on shaping up. The good-sized diesel order placed in the U.S. recently is said to be a sign of this. One thing for sure--if the Mexican roads want to upgrade their passenger equipment, their traditional supply of hand-me-downs from Yankee territory is no more. It will be interesting to see their solution. Quite possibly it will be to build them at home. If so, another reason for traveling down Mexico way.

NEXT ISSUE: Peter Bretz tells how to trace the ancestry of Mexican railroad cars.

HOW TO ADVERTISE IN RTN: EXPRESS ADS (80 typewriter characters & spaces per line) cost 25¢ per line (minimum $1). DISPLAY ADS: for camera-ready copy, $10 full page (5x8"); half page $5; quarter page $2.50; eighth page $1.25. Send remittance with orders under $10 to: Message Media, Box 9007, Berkeley CA 94709.

Mixed Train of Thoughts

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT announced Sept. 12 that it will begin constructing a rail tunnel under the Channel to France. France has okayed construction from its end. Approval of the British Parliament is still required. The tunnel would have three bores--two for rails and a central bore for maintenance..... DALLAS ARBITRATION BOARD is setting a deadline in late September for final evidence concerning the disputed train to Dallas, with a decision sometime after that..... RENO FUN TRAIN will run this season from San Francisco area Oct. 5, 12, 26, Nov. 9, Jan. 25, Feb. 1, 22, Mar. 1, 8, 22, 29, Apr. 5, May 10, with additional mid-week departures on Nov. 13, Jan. 8, and Apr. 15..... A MIDWESTERN ORGANIZATION is currently negotiating with railroad management to run an auto-train type service between the Midwest and Rocky Mountain and Southwestern points. Look for an announcement later..... BART'S "GOLDEN FLEET"--a p.r. term for modified cars which are supposed to run more reliably than presently-used cars, was announced Sept. 12. Even staunch BART supporters here have become alarmed lately over the high breakdown rate of cars in use. Service between Daly City and San Francisco is scheduled to begin in November, with trains running thru the trans-bay tube sometime next spring..... CIGAR SMOKERS RETURN: Amtrak lifted its ban on cigar and pipe smoking in club cars Sept. 1. The cars are now supposed to be divided into smoking and no-smoking sections, but with no physical barriers between the sections..... HIGH IRON COMPANY'S owner, Ross Rowland Jr., is planning a 1776 American Freedom Train tour of the nation using a steam locomotive. (Will SP allow freedom on its rails so we can see it out here? Oh, well, the Santa Fe could always bring it into Richmond)..... THE "DESCHUTES DAYLIGHT" and the LARK ran again. Southbound COAST STARLIGHT got held up behind a freight derailment at Modoc Point, Oregon Sept. 4, so got to L.A. 12 hours late, running a second night on the rails with free food and drink for all Larkers. The northbound train got re-routed thru BN's Deschutes River Canyon route via Bend, Oregon, giving riders a daylight treat of the unusual scenery, with final arrival about 4 hours late..... A FREIGHT DERAILMENT near Kelso, Washington interrupted the Seattle-Portland trains Sept. 11, with both 5:30pm trains cancelled and the northbound STARLIGHT delayed. Buses substituted for the corridor trains..... LOOK FOR CONVENTIONAL trains on the San Joaquin Valley route, not RDC's as predicted earlier..... THE FRENCH TURBO runs have not yet been announced as we go to press, but should be getting underway around October 1..... ADVANCED PASSENGER TRAIN of Britain evidently got a demonstration run at 135mph from London to Darlington Aug. 3. The London Times report didn't call it the APT, but the photo makes it appear to be that train..... THE TEXAS CHIEF in July had a 105% increase in ticket sales at Fort Worth compared to July 1972, reports John A. Mills, who is now the Amtrak man there..... GREYHOUND'S TELEVISION CAMPAIGN to run down Amtrak is backfiring. When the TV spots went on in Southern California, making snide remarks about the train, Amtrak's switchboards lit up with inquiries, "What train? How can I ride it?"..... THE DENVER ZEPHYR, the original restored train, has had apparently its first public outing Sept. 7 on a Kansas City-St. Louis roundtrip, at $75 a head, partly tax-deductible. The train is owned by the Civic Plaza National Bank, and the run was a benefit for the Kansas City Philharmonic.....

QUOTES OF THE WEEK***

"This will not simply be a proposal to expand Amtrak. It means that the federal government will be running the trains--passenger trains--and no more of these quasi-government corporations that put our essential services into the twilight zone."

--Sen. Lowell Weicker proposing nationalization of rail passenger and commuter systems to Senate, 9/10

Amtrak

IMPROVEMENT THROUGH MANAGEMENT CHANGE

Management is held responsible for any large corporation's failure to progress. Stockholders clean house on a poor management team and elect new officers in an attempt to succeed. AMTRAK should be no different!

We, the taxpayers and users, are the true stockholders in Amtrak. Thus the responsibility for Amtrak's failure to adequately progress must be placed at Roger Lewis's, Harold Graham's and their associates' doorstep.

I am addressing this ad to all sincere users of Amtrak.
Railfans who want trains to survive merely to watch or photograph can live without Amtrak. But those of us who are tired of late trains, malfunctioning so-called refurbished equipment, lack of equipment, denial of space, surly typical railroad pre-Amtrak type employees and Amtrak's general one step forward-two steps backward pace CAN DO SOMETHING NOW!

If we make our voice heard to the Congress, Roger Lewis, Harold Graham and all concerned in Amtrak's pathetic management team CAN AND MUST BE REMOVED! I propose to circulate a major nationwide petition to be presented to Congress through California Senator John Tunney. He then could present this petition, the voice of the Amtrak passengers, to the Congress during Amtrak hearings on funding, etc.

How many trips have you been on where you found yourself, as well as other passengers, so annoyed that you would sign a petition to remove those responsible for your predicament?

Being that this petition will be signed by the users of Amtrak, it should carry some weight. With the vacancies created by the Watergate scandal, President Nixon should be able to obtain employment for Mr. Lewis and Mr. Graham somewhere else where they will be less harmful to the American passenger train user! I am anxious to hear from anyone interested in circulating this petition. You need merely carry a few copies on your Amtrak trips. You will find it a simple task to obtain signatures from the too numerous irate Amtrak passengers.

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